तव कथामृतं तप्तजीवनम्
tava kathāmṛtaṁ tapta-jīvanam

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Highlights

• TILOTTAMA, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN
Mahābharata

TILOTTAMA, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

From Mahābharata ādi parva, chapters 200 to 204

Long ago, among the descendants of the great demon Hiranya-kasipu, there was a strong and mighty demon named Nikumbha who became the leader of the Daityas. Two sons were born of him, and both were endowed with unusual prowess and frightening audacity. These two enjoyed everything together and would do nothing separately. Always trying to please each other with their words and deeds, they developed the same behavior as if one person had been made into two. As the two mighty creatures grew in strength, they shared a single determination in all their tasks, and gradually they focused their determination on the single objective of conquering the three worlds.

Taking initiation into the Vedic science, they went to Vindhya and there performed dreadful austerities for a very long time. They wore tree bark and long matted hair and drove themselves to the limits of hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. With their limbs caked with dirt, they began to eat only air. For a long time they stood on the tips of their toes, arms upraised, staring with unblinking eyes and offering pieces of their own flesh in sacrifice, and they did not waver from their vows.

The two Vindhya hills, which for a long time had been heating up from the power of their fiery austerities, finally belched out clouds of smoke. It was a wondrous sight. Seeing the fierce austerities of the two brothers even the gods become frightened. The gods created obstacles to break the austerities of the two. Again and again they tried to seduce the brothers with jewels and women, but the two would not flinch, for they had taken their vows with utmost determination.

The gods tried again by creating magical effects in front of the two mighty souls, who suddenly saw their sisters, mother, aunts, wives, and other relatives being cruelly attacked by a Raksasa, spear in hand. The terrified women ran about, their hair and ornaments disheveled, and finally, losing all of their clothes, they all screamed out to the two brothers, "We beg you! Save us! Save us!"

Mighty in their vows, the two would not break their discipline. When neither of the brothers would allow himself to be disturbed or feel any grief, the women and the Raksasa and the whole scene vanished before them.

At last Lord Brahma, the grandfather of all the worlds, approached the two great demons and offered to grant them whatever they desired, for by their austerities they had earned a boon and by law Brahma had to grant it. Seeing the creator and grandfather standing before them, the two brothers Sunda and Upasunda, stood with folded hands and prayed for a boon. In unison they said, "If the grandfather is satisfied with our austerity, then let us both become knowers of magic, knowers of weapons, most powerful, and able to change our bodies at will. And if the lord is truly satisfied with us, then grant us immortality!"

The Grandfather said, "Except for immortality, all that you request will be granted. Select

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some other arrangement for your death, as even the gods do. You have undertaken these mighty austerities to achieve a material objective, and by any such materially motivated endeavor one can never achieve immortality. You took to austerity to conquer the universe, and for that reason, O leaders of the Daityas, I cannot fulfill your desire for immortality."

Sunda and Upasunda said, "We wish that there be no danger for us from any creature in the universe, moving or unmoving. Our death can only come from each other, O Grandfather."

The Grandfather said, "That which you have requested, exactly as you have stated it, I now grant to you. The arrangement of your death will be according to this boon."

Having given them this boon and restrained them from further austerities, the grandfather returned to his own planet, Brahmaloka. The two mighty demons also went home, for having achieved all these wishes they were now invulnerable in all the material worlds. Seeing that the two great demons had achieved their wishes and fulfilled their desires, all of their close associates and relatives began to rejoice and celebrate. The two brothers gave up their matted locks and placed crowns on their heads, adorned themselves with priceless jewelry, and dressed in the purest garments. At an incorrect time the two demon leaders and their relatives celebrated the full moon festival, but still managed to satisfy all their desires with the most pleasure they had ever known.

"Eat! Enjoy! Don't stop; Have a good time! Let's sing, everybody! Drink! Take this, it's yours!" Everywhere, in every house, these were the merry cries; people drank like never before, loudly clapping their hands, and the whole city of demons thrilled to the joyous celebration. The demonic Daityas could change their forms at will, and in these many merry ways they lost themselves in play. Thus the passing years seemed to them like a single day.

As soon as the celebration was over, Sunda and Upasunda, yearning to conquer the universe, took counsel and called out their army. Their close friends and the Daitya elders and councilors bade them farewell. Then, having performed the rites for an auspicious journey, they set out in the dead of night under the constellation Magha, at the head of a great and united Daitya army, equipped with clubs and three-bladed spears, and with lances and hammers in their hands.

The two went forth with supreme confidence, and on the way they were praised by the mystic Charanas with rousing battle hymns meant to invoke fortune and victory. The two Daityas flew up into space, for they could travel anywhere at will, and they went straight to the home of the gods in a warlike frenzy. Realizing they had come, and knowing also the boon they had acquired from Lord Brahma, the gods gave up their heavenly abode and went to Brahmaloka. With their intense prowess the two brothers thus conquered the planet of Indra and the hosts of Yakshas and Rakshasas, and subdued the sky-borne beings as well.

The great demons then conquered the Nagas, who had gone within the earth, and all of the ocean dwellers, and they subjugated the semi-civilized nations of Mlecchas. Then they began to systematically conquer all the earth, placing it under their dread rule. Calling together all the warriors they vehemently spoke these harsh words: "The strength and stamina of the gods and their fortune as well is fed by the grand sacrifices and oblations offered by saintly kings and *brāhmaṇas*, who thus flourish as enemies of the demons. We must therefore find out and slay every one of them."

Thus instructing all their men as they stood on the eastern shore of the great ocean, those two proceeded in all directions, fixed in their cruel decision. The two mighty demons then massacred on sight every *brāhmaṇa* who was offering sacrifice to the Supreme or engaging others in the same. Fearlessly entering the hermitages of self-realized sages, their demonic soldiers seized the sacred fires and hurled them into the water. When the exalted sages furiously pronounced curses upon them, they had no effect on the two brothers, who had grown wild by the gift of the boon.

When their curses had no effect, like arrows fired on stone, the *brāhmaṇas* abandoned their religious centers and fled. Whoever on the earth was perfect in austerity, self-controlled and devoted to peace fled in fear of the two demons, like snakes fleeing from Garuda. When the centers of spiritual culture were thus attacked and broken to pieces, with their sacred pots, spoons, and other religious articles scattered all about, the whole world seemed vacant, as if struck down by the force of time.

When saintly kings and sages were no longer visible — for they were all hiding in fear — the

two mighty demons, eager to murder, transformed themselves into maddened elephants with oozing temples. Charging wildly about, they sent those who were lying concealed in hard to reach places to the lord of death.

They became two lions, and again two tigers, and again became invisible — by all these methods the savage ones continued to slaughter the sages wherever they could find them. All over the earth, sacrifice and scriptural study ceased, the royal and priestly orders were decimated, and pious festivals and offerings were devastated. The Earth could only cry out in anguish and fear. Even buying and selling stopped, as were all the duties that are done for God, including sacred marriage.

Plowing and cow protection was no more, the towns and hermitages were ravished, and with bones and skeletons strewn about her, the earth was a dreadful sight. Gone were the offerings to the departed elders and the inspiring temple chant. The whole world, wearing the face of terror, was a sight not to be seen.

Seeing the works of Sunda and Upasunda, the Moon, the Sun, the planets, stars and asterisms, and all that dwell in heaven, fell to utter despair. Thus having conquered in all directions by cruel deeds, and facing no further opposition, the two Daityas established their residence at Kurukshetra.

All the supreme and godly sages and the perfect mystics became mortified to see the terrible persecutions executed by the two brothers. Out of compassion for the universe, the sages who had conquered worldly anger by controlling the mind and senses proceeded to the abode of the Grandfather. There they saw him seated with the gods, surrounded by the Siddhas and Vedic sages. Indra was there, as were Siva, Fire, the Wind, the Sun, the Moon, Dharma, and Budha, son of the Moon. The Vaikhanasas, Valakhilyas, Vanaprasthas, and nectar-drinking sages had all come, along with the unborn, unbewildered sages and the Tejogarbha ascetics. All these groups of sages had come to see the Grandfather, Brahma. The sages approached Brahma together and related the wicked works of Sunda and Upasunda — what they had done, how they had done it, and in what sequence. They revealed everything to Brahma, leaving nothing out. All the hosts of gods and supreme sages then urged the Grandfather to deal with this problem as his first priority. Hearing their words, the Grandfather pondered for a moment and then decided what must be done. He authorized the killing of the two brothers and called for the heavenly designer Viswakarma. When he saw him, the Grandfather gave this instruction: "Create an irresistibly maddening woman!"

Accepting his instruction, Viswakarma bowed to the Grandfather. He then thought deeply and, working hard, constructed a heavenly woman. He brought together in one woman all of the beautiful features of every moving and unmoving creature that lives in the three worlds, and invested in the woman's limbs these millions of jewels of loveliness. Thus he created a woman of celestial shape and splendor, a monumental composite of gemlike beauties.

Viswakarma built her with grand endeavor, and in all the three worlds not a single woman equaled her in the gorgeous quality of her figure and face. Such was her endowment of loveliness that not a single tiny part of her limbs was flawed or failed to entangle the eyes of those who beheld her. Like an incarnation of the Goddess of Fortune, she possessed a lovely, radiant body that stole the eyes and minds of all creatures. Since she was created by bringing together various bits of jewels, she was named Tilottama, "the ultimate woman, from bits of beauty."

The Grandfather said, "Now, Tilottama, good woman, go to Sunda and Upasunda and with your most desirable body, arouse their desire. Behave so that simply by seeing you a conflict arises between them over the possession of your perfect body and they fight each other for your sake.

"So it shall be," she promised, and after bowing to the Grandfather, she respectfully circumambulated the gods. Lord Brahma, the great controller, sat to the south, facing east, the gods sat to the north, and the sages were all around. As she walked around them, making her circle, Indra and Sthanu gravely kept themselves steady in mind, but Sthanu desired very much to see her, and as she moved to his side, he sprouted another face with curving lashes on his south side. As she continued around behind him, he sprouted a face on that side, and as she moved to the northern side, he sprouted a northern face. The great Indra manifested wide red eyes on his two sides, and in front and back, until he had a thousand eyes all over his body. Thus the great lord Sthanu became four-headed, and Indra, slayer of Bala, grew one thousand eyes.

Wherever Tilottama went, the faces of the hosts of gods and sages turned that way and followed her. Except for the greatest god, the Grandfather, the vision of all those illustrious souls was locked on the limbs of Tilottama. Seeing her perfect beauty as she moved along, all the gods and mighty sages considered their task already accomplished. When Tilottama had gone to do her work, the maintainer of the world sent all the hosts of gods and sages back to their own abodes.

Having conquered the wide world, the two demons ruled the universe in a cool and deliberate manner, for having done all they set out to do they had no rivals and felt no anxiety. Taking away all the jewels and treasures of the gods, Gandharvas, Yakshas, Nagas, earthly kings, and Rakshasas, they felt the highest satisfaction.

When there were no authorities anywhere to forbid or challenge them, they ceased from their strenuous efforts and simply enjoyed life as if they were two immortal gods. With abundant women, opulent necklaces and garlands, magnificent perfumes, the finest food, varieties of liquors that move the heart, and all that is rich and enjoyable, they achieved the highest pleasure. In their private apartments, in the forested parks, gardens and hilltop groves, and in all the places and lands that men desire, they enjoyed like two deathless gods.

One day they were freely enjoying in a forest of bright blossoming *sala* trees, atop the stony plateau of the Vindhya hills. All things that give heavenly pleasure were brought there for the brothers, and the two joyfully sat with their women on excellent seats.

The women entertained them with music and dancing and with songs that praised their feats, and then the women came near them for pleasure. It was then that Tilottama appeared in the forest, collecting flowers, dressed in a single piece of red cloth that exposed the beauty of her body. Searching for *karṇikāra* flowers that grew on the riverbank, she gradually came to the spot where the two mighty demons sat. They were drinking fine liquors, and seeing the shapely lady their minds became agitated. The two of them got up, left their seat, and went to where she stood. Both were maddened by lust, and both yearned to have her. With his hand, Sunda took the right hand of the fine-browed woman, and Upasunda held Tilottama's left hand. The brothers were intoxicated by their boon and with their own strength. They were drunk from liquor and maddened by their wealth and jewels.

Intoxicated by all these types of madness, they scowled at each other, furrowing their brows. Being overwhelmed by the madness of lust, they spoke to each other. "She's my wife and your guru!" declared Sunda. "She's my wife and your sister-in-law!" insisted Upasunda. Both flew into a rage, telling each other, "She's not yours, she's mine!" Intent on getting her, both of them grabbed their ferocious clubs, and dizzy with lust, clubs in hand, they bashed one another, screaming, "I shall be first! I shall be first!"

Struck by the horrible clubs, the two collapsed onto the earth, their bodies smeared with blood, like two bright suns fallen from the sky. Thereupon the women and the entire host of demons, trembling with shock and fear, fled to the lower world of Patala.

Then the Grandfather, with the gods and great sages, came to inspect the scene, and that pure soul paid homage to Tilottama. Brahma awarded her a wish of her choosing, and she chose the simple pleasure of devoted service to Lord Brahma. The Grandfather then happily said to her, "Bright maiden, you will move freely in the worlds of the gods, and such will be your radiance that none will easily see you." Having given her this boon, the Grandfather of all the material planets entrusted the three worlds to Lord Indra, and he returned to his own planet, Brahmaloka. ❀

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